

**Ioan Pop-Curșeu, Ștefana Pop-Curșeu, *Witchcraft in Romania*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 331 p., ISBN 978-3-031-15221-4**

The book *Witchcraft in Romania*, published in 2022 by Palgrave Macmillan, represents the continuation of the efforts undertaken by the two researchers, Ioan Pop-Curșeu and Ștefana Pop-Curșeu, whose interest in witchcraft and the imaginary led to the elaboration of this monograph.

Their work in this volume is centered around witchcraft cases in the territories that constitute contemporary Romania, aiming to capture the evolution of magic phenomena particularly between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This monograph was designed in order to provide both the Romanian and foreign audience with an insight into the Romanian

mentality concerning superstitious practices, as well as to attempt a correlation between Romanian and European communities regarding the practice of witchcraft. The purpose of the work is to recreate the context and the way in which magic beliefs were integrated and received at a cultural level by Romanian communities. The questions that the book wants to answer and that are pursued throughout the pages are: to what extent is witchcraft in Romania similar to the way it was perceived and analyzed in Western Europe, and what are the differences between the two cultural areas? At the same time, the authors aim to outline the specificity of witchcraft in Romanian communities from an anthropological perspective.

The authors propose to integrate the discourse about Romanian witchcraft into the Western cultural paradigm by applying the risk management theory model, thus following the path opened by Mary Douglas, Jean Delumeau, William C. Clark, Esther Eidinow and Ronald Hutton for the analysis of witchcraft and of the sacred. Ștefana Pop-Curșeu and Ioan Pop-Curșeu work with categories such as the “discourse of witchcraft,” defined by *Willem de Blécourt* as a coherent system of concepts, stories, and actions, wanting to see if Romanian communities were more sensitive to a different set of risk factors, starting from the lack of persecutions against witchcraft in Romanian territories, compared to Western Europe, where pyres flourished.

The sources employed by the two authors for their analysis comprise legal codes enabling a correlation between the contemporary legislation and the trials for the crime of witchcraft; canonical and folkloric texts, as well as travel journals and biographies, which are analyzed in the absence of demonology treatises, in order to see how a discourse about witchcraft was constructed, around conceptions concerning sin, illicit practices, and the various manners of relating to the devil. In addition, the authors also consider apocryphal texts and visual representations of witches in compositions of the Last Judgment, which they analyze through a careful iconographic method.

The book is structured in two equal parts, with the first part trying to expose how the phenomenon of witchcraft was perceived at a legislative level, and the second part shedding light on eschatological beliefs about the sin of witchcraft. In the first part of the book, the scope is to highlight the way in which magical practices were lived and perceived, while the second part aims to reveal that, although witch hunts did not take the same extent in this remote European area as they did in Western Europe, there was still a concern for the use of magical practices, which manifested itself at a spiritual, imaginary level. The visual sources used by the authors (paintings of the Last Judgment in Orthodox churches) thus expose the grotesque punishments to which the souls of witches were subjected for eternity. Let us now take a closer look at the contents of the book.

The first part of the book (*Trials in Earthly Life*) explores a long historical evolution, trying to see how magical practices were perceived and treated in Romanian communities, highlighting their specificity compared to Western Europe, as well as the fact that there was criticism of these practices coming from multiple cultural channels. Firstly, there was criticism directed towards witchcraft by the clergy, and then

there was criticism that encompassed all practices considered as superstitious, by the representatives of the Transylvanian School, in the context of Habsburg policies directed at standardizing beliefs and ultimately imposing a new paradigm of rationality (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries).

While the *Introduction* of the book is intended to familiarize the English language readers with Romanian history, with emphasis on some key moments in the historical evolution of the provinces that compose contemporary Romania, allowing them to better contextualize the phenomenon of witchcraft, the following three chapters explore aspects related to magical practices in Romanian communities and how they were addressed within judicial and social systems. By examining three types of texts – canonical texts, court proceedings, and travel journals or biographies – the authors provide a comprehensive perspective on magical practices in Romanian communities, stressing the interaction between the judicial system, the community, and individual perception of magical and supernatural facts. It can be observed that in Romanian communities the risk associated with magical practices was more related to shame and social reputation than to the psychological pressure exerted in the West through demonological treatises, such as the famous *Malleus Maleficarum*.

Therefore, the differences in the approach and treatment of witchcraft in Romania compared to the West are accentuated. In contrast to the persecutions witnessed in Western European societies, the Romanian communities were characterized by the absence of any form of corporeal persecution applied by the Orthodox Church, the penalties stipulated for those accused of witchcraft being only of a canonical nature (deprivation of Holy Communion for a period ranging from 5 to 20 years). One does not encounter in Romanian culture demonological aspects such as the idea of a pact with the Devil and the mythology of the diabolical Sabbath, entirely contrary to Christian liturgy and devotion to God. A less pronounced gender issue is also showed, although in Romanian communities it was also considered that women were more likely to deal with witchcraft, and to practice diverse forms of magic, such as love and fertility magic, and the use of herbs for abortion or healing purposes. Furthermore, there is a sense of community support for those accused of witchcraft, which was almost non-existent in Western Europe, Romanian people considering that the magical actors play a vital role within the community, as the village doctor and healer, soothsayer, and cunning man/woman. The authors underscore the specific influence of the cultural, religious, and social environment on how witchcraft was perceived and managed in Romanian communities from the past.

The second part of the book (*Trials in the Afterlife*) aims to directly complement the first part, which shed light on the history of witchcraft in the real world. Two main themes are addressed: the representation of witchcraft in apocryphal texts, *The Apocalypse of the Virgin* and *The Apocalypse of Paul*, which are based on condemnation of sins and the horrifying description of torments inflicted upon the damned, and the visual representations of witches (188 works of art, from all over Romanian cultural space, but mostly from the counties of Maramureș, Gorj, and Vâlcea, dated between

the 16<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> centuries). The greater spread of visual representations and thus a more pronounced belief in the supernatural in these three areas is argued to be due to a lower degree of literacy, as well as it is interpreted through the so-called “Alpine hypothesis,” whose paternity is attributed to Hugh Trevor-Roper, developed by Arno Borst and further nuanced by Guy Bechtel. This research hypothesis undertaken by Ștefana Pop-Curșeu and Ioan Pop-Curșeu places the origin of the witchcraft phenomenon in isolated mountainous areas. A chronological and socio-psychological argument for the high number of representations recorded between the years 1750-1850 is attributed to the transformations of the Church in the age of the Enlightenment. The authors argue that although there were few earthly persecutions in Romanian lands, the sins associated with magical practices were perceived as extremely dangerous, as evidenced by the violence with which tortures were applied to witches and wizards in visual representations of Hell and the afterlife. The Church symbolically punished what it could not punish in a real manner.

The authors thus succeed in showing that the methods used by researchers to interpret witchcraft in the Catholic and Protestant communities can also be applied to communities where there was no systematic purge of witchcraft by the Orthodox Church. By addressing the proposed research questions, Ștefana Pop-Curșeu and Ioan Pop-Curșeu delineate the distinctiveness inherent in the manifestation of magic and witchcraft within the Romanian communities. Furthermore, they bring to light the anthropological observation that, despite initial dissimilarities, the endeavor to combat the social menace of what was thought to be diabolical practices takes on the appearance of similarity. This assertion is accentuated by the authors’ poignant parallel drawn between the corporeal flames that consumed witches in Western European context and the eternal, symbolic fire that consumed the souls of those who engaged in the practice of witchcraft in Romanian Last Judgment images.

This synthesis on witchcraft can be integrated into ethnographic, anthropological, and historical studies because it manages to access the mentality of rural Romanian communities regarding illicit practices and rituals, and how they related to the feelings induced by engaging in such practices and behaviors. In addition to synthesizing some of the beliefs of rural Romanian society, this study addresses a topic that has been underexplored from a historical perspective, thus paving the way for further research in the field of social or ecclesiastical history that aims to highlight social discipline based on canonical texts and images. Regarding the visual aspect, these representations of witches in the flames of Hell can benefit from a more in-depth iconographic analysis, taking into special consideration the spatial, denominational, and legal constraints of the time.

From my point of view, the book is a very interesting read for both the general audience interested in history, the folklore, and superstitions of Romanian people and the specificity of its cultural practices. It also appeals to academics interested in the phenomenon of witchcraft in a larger Eastern European context.

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